

## PROVING THE DISPENSATIONAL NATURE OF THE BIBLE WITHOUT USING THE WORD *DISPENSATION*

Mal Couch, Th.D., Ph.D.  
Scofield Ministries  
Clifton, TX 76634  
malcouch1@htcomp.net

### INTRODUCTION

I discovered some years ago that I could teach Bible prophecy, and the full scope of the Word of God, without ever mentioning the word *dispensation*. In fact, I told people (with tongue in cheek) that I “don’t hold to dispensational theology” any longer, but instead (smiling). I point out I am now convinced that “the Bible itself **is dispensational** in its structure and theology.” We are not foisting upon the biblical text a man-made system; we exegete and teach *dispensationalism* because that is what the Bible is—it is dispensational!

Below I have listed eight points that I believe *gives credence to dispensationalism without using the word “dispensationalism”*. Today, being biblically dispensational, I believe we have an added problem that older dispensational theologians did not have to face. In our current Bible versions the word *dispensation* is not used. Instead the word *oikonomia* is translated *stewardship, administration* in all of its references (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10, 3:2; Col. 1:25). This often brings confusion to the student of the Scriptures because the word is no longer in many of the English versions.

Below are some issues I think we need to highlight when we consider being dispensationalists. These points we can stand firm on. I am not treating them here exhaustively but I believe we need to point them out more aggressively as we explain our position.

### 1. COVENANT THEOLOGY IS OFTEN REPUDIATED BY COVENANT THEOLOGIANS

Covenant theology considers itself the nemesis of dispensational theology. But when we look at two of the most respected spokesmen of that system, we find issues that support our argument! To give dispensationalism a fighting chance, it is interesting to note that some covenant theologians support our arguments.

Many covenant theologians admit that the covenants of redemption, and/or grace, and works, were not revealed in the Bible but instead they were “made” in eternity past and outside the framework of Scripture. Thus, they would argue, these covenants are *implied* but not *explicit*. This is a poor way of doing systematic theology! Further, they claim that

there is substantial evidence that they are supportive of legitimate biblical covenants. (p. 158)

See: (Mal Couch. *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000)

A case in point is the outstanding and well-known covenant theologian Louis Berkhof, who admits throughout his covenant theology is based on weak biblical evidence. He writes in regard to the covenant of works:

It must be admitted that the term “covenant” is not found in the first three chapters of Genesis but this is not tantamount to saying that they do not contain the necessary data for the construction of a doctrine of the covenant. (p. 213) It may still be objected that we do not read of the two parties as coming to an agreement, nor of Adam as accepting the terms laid down [for a covenant], but **this is not an insuperable objection**. (p. 213) Some deny that there is any Scripture evidence for such a promise. Now it is perfectly true that no such promise [as the covenant of works] is explicitly recorded. (p. 213) There may still be some doubt as to the propriety of the name “Covenant of Works,” but there can be no valid objection to the covenant [of works] idea. (p. 214) They who deny the covenant of works generally base their denial in part on the fact that there is no record of such a promise in the Bible. And it is perfectly true that Scripture contains no explicit promise of eternal life to Adam. (p. 216) We have no definite information in Scripture respecting the sacrament(s) or seal(s) of this covenant [of works]. (p. 217) Some Reformed teachers question whether and in how far, the covenant of works can be considered as a thing of the past; or whether and in how far, it must be regarded as still in force. (p. 218) The scriptural character of the name [covenant of works] cannot be maintained, but this, of course, does not detract from the reality of the counsel of peace. (p. 266) (*Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994)

Charles Hodge

further agrees concerning the issue of God entering into this covenant of works with Adam that “this statement does not rest upon any express declaration of the Scriptures. (2:117) Although the word “covenant” [as in works] is not used in Genesis, and does not elsewhere, in any clear passage occur in reference to the transaction there recorded, ... it is plain that the Bible does represent the arrangements made with Adam as a truly federal transaction. (2:117) (*Systematic Theology, 3 Vols*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981)

In dispensational theology, the changes in the periods of history are clear and evident. The dispensations are not hidden. We do not have to make a disclaimer as to what is happening in the biblical text. To make the problem worse for the covenant theologians, many have difficulty saying that there are three covenants: of works, redemption, and

grace. Some say that redemption and grace is the same thing. This is just two ways of describing one covenant, some would argue.

In my opinion, the covenant proponents are fishing in a dry hole. The covenants they want to hold to are not in the Bible. Thus, their arguments go no where, it seems to me. They may argue against dispensationalists that we are *creating* dispensations, since the Bible does not list all of the ones we argue for. We would answer that anyone reading the Bible carefully can see the changes that are obvious, as one moves through the Word of God from Genesis to Revelation. The covenant proponents are silent about the dispensational changes we all observe as we travel though the Bible. Those changes are real and they must mean something to the student of the Word of God.

## **2. DISPENSATIONAL CHANGES ARE OBVIOUS TO THE STUDENT OF THE BIBLE**

That is, if the student of the Bible *is thinking*. It is easy to understand that there is a change taking place in the way God dealt with Adam and Eve before the Fall, and the way He dealt with them afterward, and with Abraham as his story begins in Genesis 12. Some things have happened that make for new relationships. New plans have been put into place. (A few illustrations will be mentioned here but the purpose is not to be exhaustive.)

For example:

- A. Did God not relate differently after the Fall, with Adam and the generations that followed? Genesis 6:3 reads: “In his erring, man is but flesh.” Ellicott notes: “Man had made material things the instruments of working his carnal will” (v. 12). And after the Fall “The earth [became] corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt.” A new dispensation, or dispensations, will begin. God must now deal differently with humanity.
- B. Did not God do something special with Abraham than He did with the generations before him? Of course, He dealt with him on the basis of a covenant, the Abrahamic covenant. This was not the case with humanity before (unless one considers the Noahic covenant). Now God reveals Himself in a special way to Abraham. Something has changed. Something is new. God is confining His work with just one man and his family. Promises are made upon which the Lord will build a new revelation! Abraham’s children will become a nation by which the Lord will set forth a plan. There is now a historic, international shift.
- C. While the Abrahamic covenant, and its promises continue, there is something different and new when the law is given through Moses. The Lord told Moses: “I know the people’s sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land” (Exod. 3:8). Other passages tell us: “Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests” (Deut. 31:9). “Moses charged us with a law” (33:4). “We obeyed Moses in all things” (Josh. 1:17). “The law of the Lord given by Moses” (2 Chron. 34:14).

“You may enter the [Mosaic] covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath which He made with you today” (Deut. 29:12). “They forsook the covenant ... which He made with them” (v. 25).

The apostle Paul tells us of the purpose of the law, and that was, it had to be kept by the flesh, and human flesh would fail in trying to keep it. Paul wrote: “The law was holy, righteous, and good,” “and spiritual” (Rom. 7:12, 14). However, the dispensation of the law would not make anyone righteous. Only by the law would one truly know he was a sinner (vv. 7-11). Sin brought deception through the law, and it slew the one trying to keep it (v. 11). “What was good became a cause of death” (v. 13). By the law “sin became utterly sinful” (v. 13). While the law is spiritual, because of the flesh, we are sold “into bondage to sin” (v. 14).

Believers can agree with the law and confess that it is good, but the evil within keeps the believer from obeying it (vv. 16-23). The law reflects the righteous character of God, and its principles are good, but the most it can do is show us we are sinners, and then lead us to Christ (Gal. 3:24-26). It also gives to us the “knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). And, we are justified only by faith apart from works of the law (v. 28). Finally, those who are justified by faith “are blessed with Abraham the believer” (Gal. 3:9).

- D. Before the period of law, during and after the law, salvation has always been by faith. The greatest illustration is found in Abraham. He was justified (legally acquitted) by faith (Gen. 15:6). But it would only be with the New covenant, ratified by the death of Christ, that this would be made clear (Luke 22:20). The New covenant would replace the dispensation of the law (Jer. 31:31-37). And the Holy Spirit would be the Dynamic or Activator of the New covenant (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:14-21).

The writer of Hebrews tells us plainly that the New covenant was going to replace the law that had been found with faults; the main fault was with the limitations of the priests and the fact that no one could, by the flesh, keep the law. “Now [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second [covenant, the New covenant]. For finding fault with them, [God] says [Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted] ...” (Heb. 8:6-12).

“When [God] said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (v. 13). So the New covenant would replace the Mosaic covenant, the law!

- E. This author holds that the church does not replace the Mosaic law, but the New covenant is what replaces it. The church rides on top of, and benefits from, the New covenant. This author, and Dr. Tommy Ice, holds that the New covenant continues on through the seven year tribulation and into the dispensation of the

Kingdom. In fact, the New covenant was given to Israel, and the church presently benefits by it, but the church does not fulfill it! The church does not receive the earthly promises of the Abraham covenant but the church receives the spiritual blessings of the New covenant by faith. The New covenant gives us two blessings: (1) Eternal salvation, and (2) The gift of the Holy Spirit. Church saints are “sons of Abraham” not by blood relation but by faith (Gal. 3:7).

While the church is presently receiving the blessings of the New covenant, it will be finalized for Israel when the Messiah comes to Jerusalem (Zion) and becomes the Savior of those who “turn from [their] transgressions” (Isa. 59:20-21). This takes place when the Messiah, the Lord, establishes, finalizes, and fulfills the New covenant for Israel—when the Jews are dwelling in the Promise Land!

*The Messiah will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives. And a Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob (Israel), declares the Lord.*

*And as for Me, this is My covenant (the New) with them, says the Lord: My Spirit which is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your offspring, or from the mouth of your offspring's offspring, says the Lord, from that time [when the New covenant is operative] and forever.*

On verse 20, Unger writes: “The certainty of this ... promise of Israel’s conversion and restoration to Kingdom blessing is divinely guaranteed and attested.”

Unger adds on verse 21:

“This is My covenant.” The Lord is referring to the New covenant in Christ’s blood (1 Cor. 11:25), then made available to the nation Israel through faith (Jer. 31:31-34). It will involve putting His Spirit upon her and God’s Word in her mouth, perpetually through the millennial age and on into the eternal state (Isa. 32:15; 44:3). (*Commentary*)

The church is not now fulfilling the New covenant. With the New covenant ... there were promises of spiritual blessings and promises of earthly blessings. The church now receives the spiritual blessings. The church is never promised the earthly blessings. The church receives the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant minus the earthly promises (Gal. 3:14; 4:22-31) now by faith. Since the tribulation, Christ’s second advent and millennial age are all yet future, the fulfillment of this promise for Israel is yet future.

David M. Levy writes:

God made only one New covenant that will be fulfilled eschatologically with

Israel, ratified by Christ's blood, but participated in soteriologically by the church today, thus opening the way for Him to bless Jewish and Gentile believers alike spiritually during the church age. However, the promised provisions of national, spiritual, and material blessings made to Israel will only be fulfilled to a redeemed Israel during the Millennium. When considering all ... possible views, this last one is truest to the teaching of Scripture. We praise God that a remnant of Israel will experience the complete fulfillment of the New covenant blessings during the Millennium. (*Israel My Glory*. Jan./Feb., 2010)

F. The Millennial kingdom does not replace the New covenant. But the kingdom has to do with the "land promise" made to Abraham in God's covenant with him. The New covenant replaces the law. All that God promised to Abraham and his children are fulfilled here in the kingdom. Abraham's children will be blessed and they will occupy the Land. The Son of Abraham, the Lord Jesus, will reign over the whole earth. And, He will rule with a "rod of iron."

It is during the kingdom that the Holy Spirit applies the New covenant to the Jewish people. And it is during the kingdom that the land is occupied by the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. During the kingdom God "will put His Spirit within you and cause you to walk in His statutes" (Ezek. 36:27). "And you will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so that you will be My people, and I will be your God. Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; ..." (v. 29). The Jews will be placed on their own land. Then they will know that "I, the Lord, have spoken and done it" (v. 14). The Lord will gather the Jews from among the nations where they have gone, and will be gathered ... into their own land (37:21).

As a student at Dallas Seminary in the 1960s, I took an advance course on Eschatology with Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, using his new book *Things to Come*. Half way through the course I realized that he never mentioned the word *dispensationalism* nor was the word in the Index section in the back of the book. When I asked him about this, he simply blushed and said nothing. I realized at that point he was developing *dispensationalism* without using the word. The book is an excellent treatment of the Abrahamic covenant and the various sub-covenants but the dispensations were not mentioned. That seems to be the flow of the Bible that makes the most sense, though the various dispensations are still valid in our understanding of how the Word of God unfolds!

### **3. SOME COVENANT THEOLOGIANS ARE DISPENSATIONAL, TO A DEGREE, BUT DO NOT BUY INTO THE DISPENSATIONAL SYSTEM**

This would be the case of Charles Hodge (1797-1878) who graduated from Princeton in 1819 and became an instructor there in 1820. Apart from two years studying in France and Germany (1826-1828) he remained there throughout his teaching career. While he may not see the dispensations as we do, yet he recognizes the dispensational structure of the Bible. (Taken from Hodge's work: *Systematic Theology*, 3 Vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, 3:373-377).

### ***First Dispensation: From Adam to Abraham***

He wrote: "Although the covenant of grace has always been the same, the dispensations of that covenant have changed. The first dispensation extended from Adam to Abraham. ... The worship of God by sacrifices had been instituted."

### ***Second Dispensation: From Abraham to Moses***

He wrote: "The second dispensation extended from Abraham to Moses. The descendants of Abraham were to be the peculiar people of God. They were chosen in order to preserve the knowledge of the true religion in the midst of the general apostasy of mankind. ... God entered into a covenant with them."

### ***Third Dispensation: From Moses to Christ***

Here he becomes somewhat confused. He writes that the national Mosaic covenant was a covenant with the Jews. He then speaks of what he calls the "evangelical character" of the Mosaic Law, "a renewed proclamation of the original covenant of works"(?). There is no biblical evidence for this statement since there is no evidence for a covenant of works.

He writes: "If a man rejects the gospel, these are the principles [from the Mosaic Law], as Paul teaches in the opening chapters of his Epistle to the Romans, according to which [a man] will be judged. If he will not be under grace, if he will not accede to the method of salvation by grace, he is of necessity under the law."

### ***Fourth Dispensation: The Gospel***

Hodge seems to realize that this dispensation rests upon the New covenant that is prophesied in Jeremiah 31. And according to traditional dispensationalists the New covenant is an extension of the Abrahamic covenant.

Hodge writes: "The old dispensation of the Law was temporary and preparatory: the New is permanent and final." "The gospel dispensation is called new in reference to the Mosaic economy, which was old, and about to vanish away. It is distinguished from the old economy. ... It is more spiritual. ... It is more purely evangelical. ... The Christian economy is specially the dispensation of the Spirit. The great blessing promised of old, as consequent on the coming of Christ, was the effusion of the Spirit on all flesh, i.e., on all nations and on all classes of men."

He adds: "This dispensation [of the gospel] is, therefore, the last before the restoration of all things; the last, that is, designed for the conversion of men and the ingathering of the elect. Afterwards comes the end; the resurrection and the final judgment. ... When the gospel is fully preached, then comes the end."

Hodge rejects the coming of the dispensation of the kingdom. The gospel dispensation is the end of the development of the dispensations. A Jewish kingdom is lacking and

unnecessary in his theology. Hodge and other amillennialists are generally silent on the subject of a messianic kingdom.

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Below are additional points that reinforce the idea of dispensationalism. Some who are not dispensationalists agree that these are legitimate principles in the Scriptures. I would argue that they are essential in the development of what we teach about the dispensational guidelines.

#### **4. THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST**

Hebrews 9:28: The author writes: “So Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.” *Second time* is *ek deuterou*. Or, *from, out of a second*. Kenneth Wuest correctly writes:

The act of Messiah in bearing the sins of humanity, refers to His first appearance upon earth, to His first Advent. The words “shall appear the second time,” refer to His second Advent. The words “unto them that look upon Him (Gk.),” refer to [or point to] Israel. The disciples of John the Baptist came to Jesus and said, “Are You He that should come, or do we look for another?” (Matt. 11:3). The Rapture is not in view here, neither the Church. This is Jewish. The expression refers to the second Advent of Messiah to Israel for the Millennium. ... This corresponds to Messiah’s appearance upon earth in the second Advent to *Israel*, having already accomplished salvation. His return will be apart from sin in that he settled the sin question the first time He came. (*Word Studies*, 4 Vols. 2:171)

That He comes “the second time” to establish His earthly reign is the only thing that makes sense here.

There are thousands of verses that speak of Christ’s second coming. Where do we place these verses if they do not constitute a new dispensation? Hodge ignores the idea of the messianic reign, as do almost all amillennialists.

#### **5. THE LAW GREW OLD**

What does the Lord mean when He speaks of “A new covenant”? The writer of Hebrews refers again to Jeremiah 31:31-34. He writes: God “made the first [covenant, the Mosaic] obsolete, But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (Heb. 8:13). “To grow old” is in Greek *palaios*. The first covenant, the law, is no longer viable. It had to be replaced by the prophesied New covenant as mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Christ ratified the New covenant by His blood as He mentioned in Luke 22:20. “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.” In my commentary on Luke in the Twenty-first Century Commentary series, I wrote:

“In the middle of the Passover meal, Christ made a prophetic proclamation that, when He went to the cross, He would ratify by His sacrifice a new covenant that would replace the covenant of the Law, i.e., the Mosaic covenant. The broken bread passed around pictured the coming sacrifice of His body. ... The new covenant was ratified by the death of Christ, was inaugurated at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13), and now benefits those in the Church age. Since the nation of Israel had rejected Christ, they rejected the blessings of the new covenant. Presently, the body of Christ, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, enjoys this covenant, but someday it will be fulfilled with the believing nation of Israel” when Christ establishes the kingdom. The kingdom is a new dispensation!

The New covenant will clearly be the spiritual dynamic of the kingdom!

## **6. “IN THESE DAYS HE HAS SPOKEN TO US!”**

In the larger picture, the writer of Hebrews is telling us that Christ had a new message for us: “In these last days [God] has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed as heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). The author is referring to the fact that the Lord inaugurated the New covenant that would replace the Law. This is one of the most important messages in the book of Hebrews. It is central to the book. Before, in the Old Testament, God had spoken to the Jewish fathers “in (by) the prophets” (v. 1). But now the Son, by inaugurating the New covenant with His shed blood, ratified this covenant, and, it was launched in Acts 2 by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the New covenant replaced the dispensation of the Law!

After giving a *new* message, and after His resurrection, the Lord ascended back to the Father where He has “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (v. 3). The New covenant has been ratified. The church benefits by it today but does not fulfill it, as we normally use that expression. Christ will bring a complete fulfillment when the kingdom is established.

## **7. “GRACE AND TRUTH” IS SOMETHING BEYOND THE LAW**

Three times in John 1:14-17, John the apostle ties Grace and Truth together with the coming of Christ. The Son is said to be “full of Grace and Truth” (v. 14); with His coming “we have received Grace and Truth” (v. 16); and “the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (v. 17). Some may disagree that these verses have some kind of dispensational overtones, and thus in reality, they actually are dispensational in nature. Ed Blum writes (BKC):

The greatness of the old dispensation was the giving of **the Law** by God **through**

His servant **Moses**. No other nation has had such a privilege. But the glory of the church is the revelation of God's **grace and truth ... through Jesus Christ**.

I would make one correction to this statement: Blum should have said by "the glory of the New covenant ..." The New covenant is what contrasts the Law. Blum adds: "The glorious revelation of God which the *Logos* displayed was **full of grace and truth**, that is, it was a gracious and truthful revelation" (v. 17). We are now in a new dispensation that contrasts the Law. John adds: "We have all received, and grace upon grace" (v. 16).

Some have compared this to a waterfall. Grace is tumbling upon the top of grace. More and more grace! *Upon* is the proposition *anti*. The root meaning: "face to face." (Dana & Mantey) "Fresh grace appears over and above." (Nicoll)

In contrast to the inexorable demands of a law that brought no spiritual life, Jesus Christ brought "grace," the unearned favor of God. The Law said: Do this and live; Christ says: God gives you life, accept it. "Truth" also was brought by Christ.—"truth" here means "reality" as opposed to the symbolism of the Law. In the Law was a shadow of good things to come: in Christ we have the good things themselves. (Nicoll)

## **8. THE TIME TO DIE vs. THE TIME TO REIGN**

Though they did not fully grasp what they were saying, the Jews realized, without full comprehension, that Christ would reign but He would also die! He would be a king and He would be a Savior! Surely they saw dispensational distinctions in these truths!

By the Holy Spirit, Zacharias said that God was giving the "knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 1:77), and, the Lord was raising up "a horn of salvation ... from our enemies" (a political deliverance) (vv. 69-71). Nathanael well knew Psalm 2. He paraphrased Psalm 2 when he told Christ that He was the "Son of God" and the "King of Israel" (John 1:49). Quoting Isaiah 53, John the Baptist realized in some limited way that Christ was to be a sacrifice for sins when he cried out "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36).

Peter points out that God had before announced to the Jews the suffering of His Anointed One (Christ) in the prophets (Acts 3:18), now the Jews must repent (change their minds about sin and about Christ) in order to receive salvation. Heaven is retaining Christ "until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of the holy prophets from ancient time" (v. 21). Christ's first coming brought salvation from sin; His second coming will bring a salvation that is not in reference to sin (Heb. 9:28). It will be a political salvation.

## CONCLUSION

How can one be a dispensationalist without going through a lot of theological twists and turns that complicate the message of the Bible? Here are some old tried and true guidelines—some traditional principles and some very simple ones:

1. Let the Bible speak for itself. Allow a normal reading of Scripture.
2. Don't get "theological" and philosophical in trying to define dispensationalism.
3. Understand that there is a progressive flow in Scripture. The Bible is going forward; allow it to do that without complication. This is what we call progressive revelation.
4. Don't rush in to interpret the Bible by any traditional system of theology, such as Covenant theology, or even traditional dispensationalism. I don't have to impose a system on the Word of God in order to let it speak for itself. By the way I am not against traditional dispensationalism, I just believe there is a better way to show the great dispensational truths that we all hold dear!
5. Look for changes and contrasts that are obvious in the reading of the text.
6. Do not allegorize or "spiritualize" the Scriptures. Take the words at their most common meaning.
7. Use common sense when interpreting the Bible. Don't get too fancy and over complicate the thoughts of the verses.
8. Observe carefully the context of various passages. Consider the simple meaning of words, the grammar of the sentences. Again, let the Bible speak to you; don't speak for it!
9. If you are a pastor, or teach in a Bible school, teach mainly verse by verse when possible. The Bible is able to explain itself! Do not read into the text what you want it to say.
10. The interpreter must come to the Bible as open minded as possible, without any theological bias or presuppositions. I wrote in my hermeneutic textbook: "The Bible student must also approach the Scriptures with sound judgment and reason, seeking to be as objective in his approach to the Bible as possible, without coming to the Scriptures with prejudice or preconceived notions."

While the Bible has complications, it is in itself not *complicated*. It speaks more clearly today to my mind, my heart and soul, than ever before! --Dr. Mal Couch